

HANDOUT: 3.6 — IMPROVING GROUP DISCUSSIONS**Potential Problems**

1. **A lack of confidence in the leader/facilitator.**¹ Participants should feel assured that the leader will not hold honest comments made during the debate against group members.
2. **Jumping to conclusions.** The leader lets the group jump to conclusions before adequate consideration of possible alternatives.
3. **Too fast paced.** If the leader moves the discussion along too rapidly, the members may feel that outcomes are predetermined and their opinions are a “rubber stamp,” which causes them to lose confidence in the sincerity and competence of the leader.
4. **Too slow paced.** Spending too much time on an unimportant phase of the problem means the leader failed to move the discussion along.
5. **Poor word choice.** When technical terms are used without adequate definition or emotionally charged words are used, the participants can become defensive.
6. **Failure to establish or clarify purposes.** The leader may be indecisive and contribute to stalling discussions.
7. **Lack of preparation.** It is problematic if either the participants or the leader is unprepared.
8. **Failure to summarize group thinking.** The group can become impatient and push ahead in a disorganized manner if the leader doesn’t summarize thinking.
9. **Lack of productive summaries.** If the leader fails to spotlight the more valuable contribution through summaries, the group can see progress towards an objective.
10. **Failure to stop contentious situations (“blow the whistle”).** The leader should not be drawn into arguments and needs to bring the discussion back into bounds when it gets out of control because of petty arguments. The leader also must not make statements that stifle comments by others.

¹ In this handout, “leader” refers to facilitator and/or the leader.

**Tips for Improving
Group Discussions**

1. **Provide written materials.** To suggest that business is to be conducted in a certain time frame, provide each member with a written copy of an agenda, issues, points, or problems for discussion.
2. **Restate or paraphrase.** Restate the main objective, question, topic or problem and point out or ask group if discussion is on target.
3. **Use the parking lot.** For digressive topics, ask the participant to hold comments for later in the discussion. For a gentle touch, it is fine to indicate that while the comment is important, it does not fit at the moment.
4. **Guide the group back to the agenda.** Remind the group that certain comments are out of bounds.
5. **Ask questions that focus on relevance.** Ask, "How will our discussion at this moment help to solve the real issue before us or fit with the purposes of today's discussion?"
6. **Call on a productive participant.** Call on a participant who usually makes comments on the real issue and who seems to stay on target.
7. **Focus on problem solving.** Ask the questions, "Is this point pertinent? Is it helping to solve the real problem before us?"
8. **Bring it back on track.** Ask questions that help a participant (or the group) recognize that the discussion is off target.
9. **Be frank.** Ask directly, "Do you want to get back to the objective and purpose that motivated us to come together today?"
10. **Help everyone save face.** Adjourn the meeting or take a break if necessary and allow the group or the disruptive participants to cool off so they can recognize that they were off target. This tactic helps everyone save face. When the group reconvenes, the leader begins with a fresh start.

Source: Hinkey, L. and Engleby, L. (instructors/editors). 2002. Navigating in Rough Seas: Public Policy Issues and Conflict Management. NOAA Coastal Services Center. 17-18 pp.